

Kazakhstan • A Whole School commitment to sustainability - embracing the SDG's through stories

A special thanks to Astrid Jacoby, Sustainability Coordinator at Haileybury Almaty School, for contributing to this

Kazakhstan's education system is currently [undergoing reforms](#)¹²⁵, with the introduction of environmental education at primary level being one element of these. This example however, from Haileybury Almaty primary and secondary school, is a fee-paying not-for-profit international school with approximately 750 pupils. So, while based in Kazakhstan, this school is separate to Kazakhstan's mainstream national context as it follows the International [British curriculum](#)¹²⁶. However, the school still seeks to connect intimately with the local context of Kazakhstan e.g. hosting nationwide Olympiads or by inviting and supporting high achieving students from local schools to attend Haileybury's 'Scholars for Sustainability' program. This example highlights one school's effort in making the transition from a small, dedicated group of teachers pioneering Education for Sustainability (ESD) at the school, to a whole school effort. It is also a very honest account about the importance of honest and open communication about what does and does not work.

Contribution by Astrid Jacoby, Sustainability Coordinator at Haileybury Almaty International School (HAL):

The school is at a crossroad, HAL adopted 'Sustainability' as one of the school's six strategic goals in 2020. These goals have become an integral part of the school's development plan. Originally ESD initiatives were 'extra-curricular' through the Eco-School program and 'Scholars for Sustainability Program'. The link that was established between these two initiatives showed us how a holistic approach to sustainability-oriented education could be strengthened. HAL has also made the first strides to include this in curricular teaching as well, but capacity building and institutional practices are not yet given enough priority and require on-going efforts. Over the last 1½ years, awareness levels amongst teaching staff and pupils have risen remarkably. However, increased awareness and understanding come hand in hand with raised concerns and the risk is that if the current momentum is not harnessed in the right way, it could lead to rising levels of eco-anxiety, disengagement, and disillusionment.

In August 2020, HAL established a part time position of 'Sustainability Coordinator' for 1 day/week. HAL has also

been an Eco-School since 2018 and employs a teacher working as the Eco-School Coordinator. While discussions in Autumn 2020 led HAL to adopt sustainability as a school strategic goal, which was a significant step, it was not accompanied by the establishment of a common baseline understanding within the Leadership Team of what a 'Sustainable School' would look like, and in turn what priorities would need to be set. So while sustainability is one of the six strategic goals it has at times had to compete with other goals for leadership support, even when it was well supported from below.

The first year of implementation was also affected by the real challenges imposed by COVID over the day-to-day running of the school and the limited time to reflect and plan strategically for a detailed implementation and improved practice.

Common misconceptions and mis-definitions are barriers that need to be overcome to enable the school community to embrace engagement at a holistic level. However, progress is steadily being made, for example, by the summer term 2021, sustainability became part of the teacher annual appraisal system. Each Senior School department now elects a 'lead for sustainability', who become members of the Sustainability committee, to which representatives of operational departments (kitchen, maintenance, bursar, procurement, marketing) are also invited. The committee is officially made up of 19 members of staff including the Deputy Head Academic, a Head of Department, House Master, department leads, Eco School and Sustainability Coordinators, Head of Maintenance, Procurement Director, Marketing, Bursar, Kitchen representative etc.

Overall, elements of a patchwork approach still prevail at the school, yet the 'cultural tipping point' could well happen very quickly with the full commitment from senior leadership. Until then, the focus will be to increase the pressure from the bottom – to link up all departments and faculties in both the junior and senior school and to find ways to share responsibilities for the transition towards sustainable practices.

Since 2020, examples of a Whole school Approach being committed to at HAL includes a whole school CPD focus on ESD. While more is needed, last year a monthly full

hour 'sustainability/eco school' CPD was established for the entire school. Topics such as 'Science of Climate Change' 'Education for Sustainable Development' 'Defining Sustainability' etc. were addressed during this period. While pressures on the CPD schedule have reduced the frequency and length of sustainability related CPDs greatly during this academic year the need for ESD competency, both through peer to peer exchange and teachers going on external competency building courses, has been established. Another example is Year 12/13 pupils, concerned about mental health issues, initiating a whole school effort to introduce a mental health ambassador system for the younger students. The school facilitated external training for the year 12/13 pupils to become peer mentors at the secondary school. The aim was to build up a system where younger pupils have 'buddies' they can approach with worries and issues to talk through and receive peer support. This great initiative could be improved further by, for example, developing socio-emotional and behavioural competencies within the framework of ESD pedagogy. A particular focus should be to raise peer-mentors' awareness and understanding about the importance of pre-empting 'eco-anxiety' to ensure ongoing agency and hope among not just the younger generation. In parallel, there is a real need to equip teachers with the skills to engage in interactive teaching and learning about the Climate Crisis and Sustainability at an **age-appropriate** level to avoid unintended consequences.

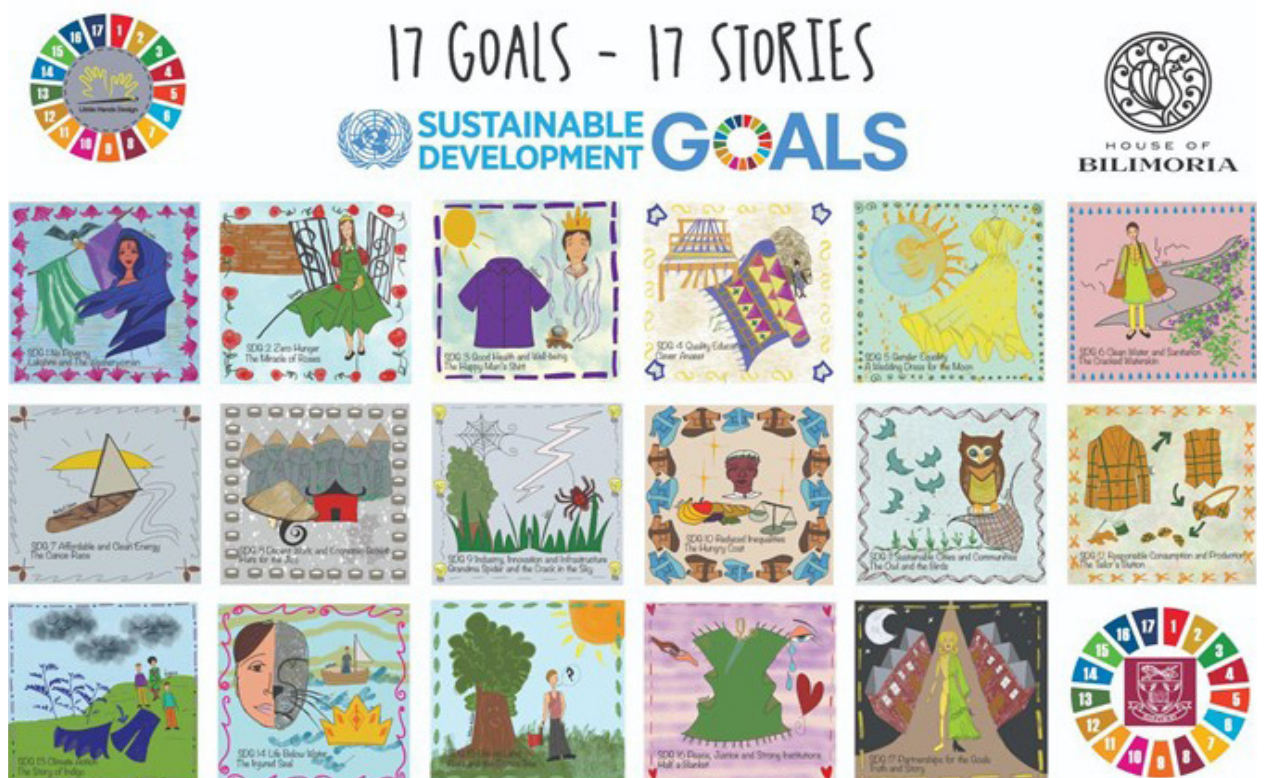
The school's Sustainability Coordinator also attends relevant conferences e.g. '**Children and the Climate Crisis** - Working with their Anxiety, Anger, Grief and Hope' organised by the [Climate Psychology Alliance](#)¹²⁷. From this, a special CPD in collaboration with the school counsellor on 'How to speak to children about difficult issues such as the Climate Crisis' is planned.

The following are a few other examples of initiatives started since the school adopted Sustainability as a strategic goal:

The SDGs in Stories programme was introduced in September 2020 to support the monthly introduction of one SDG to pupils and teachers. Throughout human history people have used stories to share their wisdom, morals and hopes and through stories pass on deep intuitive understandings of what is right and wrong. In this collaborative project traditional folktales from all over the world and many different cultures have been analysed and rewritten to help us connect to and embrace each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

May anyone who reads them - ponder, discuss and retell - and come up with their own interpretation through creative problem solving and hands-on projects in all subjects!

"The green economy is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world, there are an ever increasing number of 'green jobs'"



'SDGs in Stories' project developed by [Little Hands Design](#)¹³⁵, in collaboration with [House of Bilimoria](#) and professional storytellers Marion Leeper & Tanya Batt

in law, engineering, medicine, IT and many other areas. Let our learning reflect and prepare us for this! We need the courage to get engaged and stay optimistic in spite of the complexities, to find creative solutions others have not, in our own environments as well as at national and global level Let the 17 SDGs be the guiding stars to our lives and that of future generations!" (Little Hands Design¹²⁸).

Key WSA Principles in action at *Haileybury Almaty primary and secondary school*

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- Sustainability as one of the schools strategic goals
- School board supporting the launch of the schools Climate Charter, Declaration of Climate Emergency
- Setting up a whole school Sustainability Committee that included teachers, leaders and other key support staff
- Eco-School Committee and Scholars of Sustainability initiative supports multiple active student engagement surrounding the schools sustainability issues

Pedagogy & Learning

- Project based learning is utilised in many subjects
- School uses the High Performance Learning framework
- Embedding Education for Sustainability pedagogy assisted by 'curriculum tracker' to share Good Practice

Capacity building

- Regular ESD staff Continued Professional Development
- Sustainability coordinator employed at the school

Institutional Practices

- Visual green nudges throughout the campus
- SDG stories – sustainability topics discussed in and beyond the classroom
- Sustainability changes being made to the school buildings
- Fortnightly walk-around to share Good Practice amongst teachers
- Eco-School committee supports student driven changes

Community Connections

- Longstanding links between 'Houses' with local charities e.g. Women's Shelter

Curriculum

- Embedding 17 SDGs into existing curriculum, however the British curriculum currently does explicitly support a holistic approach to ESD

Although a decision to embed the SDG in both the Junior and Senior School was taken, provisions for accountability were not put in place which led to bigger variation in implementation. Despite this, there is noticeable progress which has been enhanced by clear visual prompts throughout school, including the build-up of 17 posters of the 17 SDG stories on the main staircase.

As well as being an Eco-School, other initiatives the school is part of includes the Climate Action Project, a climate change awareness initiative that sets out to inspire kids to take on challenges that collectively can make a big difference to the health of our planet. It has been developed in collaboration with WWF, a world-renowned environmental organisation. Another recent whole school commitment is in response to COP26 and prompted by receiving a 'Climate Action School of Excellence' international award, Haileybury Almaty School officially declared 'Climate Emergency' with the formal adoption of the [Haileybury Climate Charter](#)¹²⁹.

During 2021 HAL's cohort of 'Scholars for Sustainability' (a project that unites internal and external scholarship pupils of Haileybury Almaty for one main goal - Sustainable Development) enthusiastically also acted as 'climate educators' and rolled out the [Climate Action Project](#)¹³⁰ (CAP) to the younger year groups in the Autumn term 2021. With awareness that short-term initiatives like this can result in 'Bolt-On' approaches to sustainability education, we did not want to restrict the CAP to individual classrooms and teachers, instead this was facilitated and presented in class by The Scholars to ensure maximum impact. This was a pilot and a chance for us to trial of a peer-mentor approach. The aim was to support our cohort of Year 12 and 13 'Scholars for Sustainability' to become educators (have a domino effect on teaching) for the younger year groups 7, 8 and 9, and were thus able to reach a much larger cohort of CAP participants. The CAP was run in IL (independent learning time), which meant that every pupil in year 7,8 and 9 was able to engage twice a week for 25 minutes over a whole term, and the Scholars had a 25-minute planning session per week with the Sustainability coordinator and Deputy Head Academic.

The next phase of the CAP project planning was linked to the Eco-School programme run at the school. Again, we wanted to interlink the sustainability initiatives already present at the school to be able fully embrace a whole school approach. Here, the groups would adopt existing initiatives instead of inventing new ideas. The plan was for them to run these with their younger groups in Spring term. However, for several reasons including the delayed start to term due to unrest and COVID, as well as Scholars' involvement in other activities and lack of strategic support from leadership, some groups were not able to meet deadlines and ran out of steam. However, 6 groups (from

“What inspired me most about the climate action project is the emphasis on the importance of planned and mindful projects and actions to succeed and make an impact. Being able to work with younger students to encourage them to do something that will make a real change is an amazing experience. They motivate us to continue working on our projects and pursuing something positive that others will be able to continue in the coming years”

Maiya, HAL Sustainability Scholar

12) are ready to present their ideas for fantastic ‘system changing’ proposals at the Dragon’s Den. They then made [videos online](#)¹³¹ which opened up to a popular vote to raise awareness.

Like many schools this case study represents a school that is at a crossroad and while committed to a whole school approach still is open about where they are in this process and how far they have to go. It is a reminder that becoming a sustainable school is not something to implement or achieve with a fixed end point, instead it is a continual process that takes time and dedication to commit to.

The excerpt that follows is taken from a [book](#)¹³² produced by an educational charity Astrid Jacoby founded over 20 years ago, *Little Hands Design*¹³³, and brings together knowledge gained working with schools on sustainability issues. Similar to Astrid’s current role as HAL’s Sustainability Coordinator, this handbook, and the charities focus, is supporting schools to engage with sustainability and creating space to re-think what this entails. The excerpt shared here is Astrid’s key, down to earth, advice to schools trying to ‘walk the talk’.

Encouraging behavioural changes through [green nudges](#)¹³⁴ throughout the physical learning environment, along the wall scrolls with the 17 SDG stories

Strengths/prospects

- School investing by hiring in-house sustainability Education coordinator
- Sustainability is adopted as a strategic goal
- Good percentage of staff and pupils willing to engage through rising awareness of global pressures and as a result of regular program of sustainability CPDs
- Sustainability included in staff appraisal system
- International projects such as the Climate Action Project have been a source of inspiration for the students and Green nudges and signs around school
- Slowly more accountability is being built with binding commitments in place, for example HAL charter declaring a climate emergency and creating the [Haileybury Climate Charter](#)¹³⁶

Challenges

- Takes time – while there is a commitment to a WSA, there is still a long way to go
- International British curriculum does not explicitly support a WSA to ESD
- Varying levels of buy-in from senior leadership team
- Difficult to establish common baselines of what a ‘sustainable school’ means for teaching & learning and organisational practices
- Need to continue to prioritise ‘educating the educators’ as well as all non-teaching staff for unified approach – staff professional development is essential for sustainability literacy
- To be aware of the risk of ‘blind activism’ by doing less, but more strategic
- To adopt a proactive approach to pre-empt eco anxiety

The Scholars for Sustainability team with the Sustainability coordinator and the Deputy Head Academic





Excerpt from *Look and Feel Good without harming our World! Practical Handbook, Sustainability Education through Fashion and Textiles (p. 10- 11)*, by Astrid Jacoby Founder and Trustee of Little Hands Design

There are concerning trends which have emerged, which result in serious barriers slowing down the urgent global strive to save our world.

Firstly, although the word 'sustainability' is almost overused these days, many people consider it a synonym for the word 'environmentalism'. This failure to embrace the complex and interconnected dynamics of human interactions with each other and with the natural world often leads to addressing the symptoms rather than developing the capacity for joined up thinking to explore causes. It is for that reason that the United Nations are campaigning for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to provide the benchmark of everything we do.

Secondly, we hear time and time again that 'our hope is the younger generation'. Over the last 30 years the damage we have caused to the world we live in is far bigger than in all our previous history. We are now in a situation where the consequences of our actions are already being felt by many and the time frames have become so tight that it is no longer a matter of 'doing some good for after we are gone!' We, who call ourselves adults, are to blame. We need to stand up to our responsibility, not seek comfort in denial by transferring that burden onto the shoulders of our children. Who are the adults in the room? How are we guiding our younger generation through leading by example? How are we developing hope, resilience and agency in our younger generation if we do not ourselves? The sustainability crisis is a mental health crisis!

Thirdly, we are clinging to the belief that we can solve our existential crisis by adding on sustainability considerations to 'business as usual'. In schools we form pupil led Eco groups; in companies we add a sustainability policy to our goals, as consumers we start using cloth bags and bamboo toothbrushes. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the resulting decades of unfettered capitalism have collectively closed mindsets to the possibility of a 'third way'. The biggest challenge of our times is to open our minds to question everything we do critically, to look at systems, business models and daily routines making up our lives, and to join up the dots between them.

Fourthly, more and more organisations, businesses and individuals have become concerned about how sustainable our practices are, resulting in a huge increase in demands for actions. Much progress has been the result of that ever-increasing engagement. However, this could also be called the era of 'blind activism' with much energy spent in a disjointed manner, duplications of already existing structures and even resulting in unintended consequences offsetting the intended benefits. Ironically, it seems that we need to slow down, to do less but better, to allow ourselves thinking and planning spaces. Actions should count louder than words but when action is primarily used towards addressing our anxieties and as a 'path of least resistance' it can become a barrier for effective and sustainable change.